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LABOR CONDITIONS WITH REFERENCE TO THE WAR

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WHAT of the labor shortage? The question is on the lips of many war leaders and most business men. The American labor supply seems less adequate to meet the demands than ever before in our development.

From the West come dire predictions of failure of our aims of feeding our Allies if we do not effectively increase the agricultural labor force. Greater acreage or more intensive cultivation will require more labor. The fuel administrators and mine operators face a real labor shortage as well. Western Pennsylvania is asking now for miners. Continued and increased production is needed to keep our furnaces and factories supplied with fuel. The exhaustion of the railroad labor reserve has helped to bring the transportation crisis.

The building of houses to care for growth of population and emergency construction around new munitions works are halted by lack of hands. Even the shipbuilding program upon which our success in the war so largely depends is endangered by want of an adequate and appropriate supply of workers.

And the situation will no doubt go from bad to worse. The war is sure now to last at least another year, and the taking of another half million or more men from industry for military service will further deplete our labor force. The labor of supplying an increased army with munitions, clothes and food will still further tax our productive powers. As the war goes on and the brunt of the struggle passes to the United States, the demand for materials will increase disproportionately, and our industrial efforts must be inordinately increased to supply our own shortage—not to emphasize the need of our Allies,—likely to be increasingly bitter.

No wonder that panic-stricken editors have been seeking the breakdown of standards of hours of work, asking for the widespread employment of women and for industrial conscription. The production required to support our armies and navies and win the war is being deterred by the chaotic condition of the labor market, the dearth of effective man power. This is the first time of industrial expansion in which definite and universal attention has been called to the anarchic individualism of our employment system. Hitherto we have been

content merely to discuss and worry with the problems of employment in times of distress and depression. The futility of past attempts is seen in the panic of 1914, when immediate relief and not constructive change still characterized our policy. In peace times we have failed to solve our labor problem, the great task of providing comprehensive machinery for the securing and maintaining of an adequate labor supply. Now as an inevitable measure of war efficiency we face the need of grappling successfully with the problem.

This trying and complex situation will not be met by sweeping generalizations, by hurling denunciation, or calling for panaceas. It can be met alone by authentic information, temperate analysis and slow constructive effort. Where are we to get the labor to serve our industrial effort?

The problem of labor shortage admits of many solutions. For the time being, at any rate, two solutions must be ruled out. The supply can not be increased by immigration, and English experience proves that extension of hours of work does not increase, but actually decreases, production. There is another theoretical solution which may be of scant immediate practical significance—the reduction of labor need by technical improvement and introduction of automatic machinery to replace labor power appreciably. The main practical expedients at hand, then, are obviously the increased employment of women; the diversion of workers from the production of luxuries that the nation must forego in the rigors of war, and finally the adequate and complete organization of the labor market to eliminate or reduce turnover and time loss between jobs, and lessen unemployment. We must utilize the existing labor supply to the fullest possible extent in the present crisis, if we are to attain the great aims we have set for our nation.

Valuable distinctions which must be borne in mind in getting at our difficult problem, are between shortage in skilled and unskilled labor, and net shortage as contrasted with local, temporary shortage.

There was undoubtedly with the falling off of immigration in a period of industrial boom following the war an unprecedented dearth of unskilled labor in the North in steel and railroad industry and in construction work. This shortage was met by bringing or inducing to come North more than half a million negro workers from the low-priced labor market of the South. But less than five per cent. of these workers are being introduced into skilled services. Again, women have been and are now being drawn into rough, unskilled work in increasing

numbers and they are being slowly trained and directed into skilled activities. In Europe the use of women in industry has been remarkable.

A year ago, over a million new women had entered industry since the start of the war—about 985,000 replacing men. Employment of women saved England. Munition work is largely done by them. According to a recent editorial in *The New Republic* at Woolwich Arsenal, for instance, in August, 1914, only 125 of 10,866 workers were women. Now over a third of the 75,000 workers employed are women. In the United States there is as yet no definite information, but unofficial reports show rapid recruiting of women into industry, in munition works, railroading and other occupations formerly engaged in by men alone.

CONSCRIPTION OF LABOR

In the unskilled groups particularly, the inability to secure an adequate labor supply is now marked, because of the casual character of the labor force of single men available. The turnover figures run above a thousand per cent. and are almost incredible. It is no wonder that the call comes for "conscription of the labor force." Yet on second thought this is but a short-cut remedy of coercion. If we understood the implications of the term we would not use it so glibly. Forced labor has never been efficient. Even organized Germany with her great war need has not proven that military control and punishment secure results from unwilling workers except in the crudest tasks and its supervision is too costly save by an army in the field; and conscription would be unfair and inexpedient except in a completely socialized nation. A return to compulsory labor even in war time might be a return to "slacking" and "sabotage" losses which have always gone along with such work. The present labor force is, in a measure, working gladly and energetically; add to its numbers by conscription and force them to work by law or threat of army service and the mutiny that agitators teach will seem to have a cause in fact. The seeds of organized revolt may soon be sowed in our midst. In any case, the young, unskilled casuals will be taken in the draft and that new experiment is difficult enough.

Rather must this unskilled labor force outside the draft age be attracted and held than coerced. It can be held, we were convinced, by a study of the negro migration this summer, only by selection of family men and provisions of living conditions on a family basis. In this regard the problem is exactly that of the skilled worker; the reduction of turnover and securing of a

stable labor force in any plant must wait upon adequate provision of decent housing facilities. But the subject of industrial or governmental housing is another story and would require separate treatment.

SKILLED LABOR SHORTAGE

Is there a net shortage of skilled workers? When we hear of the labor force that the Emergency Fleet Corporation will need to create its 6,000,000 tons; now announced as 300,000 men, and the increasing shortage of the munitions plants, there seems to be a great lack. But no one knows if these men do not exist, or are merely out of touch with the new jobs. We know, indeed, that men are being now laid off in numbers by industries suffering from the war, because of lack of fuel and materials, or decreased demand for products. For instance, in Pittsburgh with a marked shortage of unskilled men, an actual surplus of mechanics and carpenters, who have drifted in perhaps from the cantonments and who need to be placed elsewhere, now exists. The war work of the nation has been curtailed because no comprehensive system of labor management has been developed.

ORGANIZATION OF THE LABOR MARKET

Our greatest problem, particularly in meeting the skilled labor need, is still the distribution of our labor force to the necessary industrial work, reducing part-time work, elimination waiting between jobs and the tremendous turnover of labor. This is now estimated by employment managers to average over 100 per cent. a year, through this country, and in the shipbuilding force and the unskilled negro labor group it runs over 1,000 per cent. Our present labor force because it is inefficiently handled is not rendering one half of its possible service, is not fifty per cent. efficient.

Competition has in the past been unregulated by considerations of national welfare. Industry has habitually depended upon a surplus labor force, and hiring and firing with free contract, to obtain workers. We disregarded the pathetic need of the surplus laborer; now the dire need is that of the nation and we must meet it. It is lack of mechanism for distribution of labor rather than a dearth of labor that brings the present crisis.

LABOR EXCHANGES

We have not yet created national agencies to connect the jobless man and the manless job. The 23 state public employ-

ment bureaus have been sadly handicapped by insufficient funds and untrained personnel and have worked mostly with placing the unskilled laborer. Now the states are seeing the situation more clearly in Committees of Public Safety. Pennsylvania has set aside \$25,000 of the Defense Fund for the labor-placement work of the Civilian Service and Labor Committee, and the number of offices has been increased from five to thirteen. The United States Employment Service which grew out of the work of Immigration Bureau of the Department of Labor has some 94 offices at present. The last session of Congress appropriated only \$250,000, a mere fraction of the cost of an adequate system. It placed about 41,000 in August, a small per cent. of the need. For five weeks, ending July 13, the British Exchanges, 400 in number, placed 175,000. The members of the British Munitions Board on their recent visit announced the English plans to increase the number to 2,000; over ten times as many as the United States with a population twice as large.

A FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT SERVICE AND THE ROBINSON-KEATING BILL

A new Employment Service has been given independent organization in the Department of Labor, in charge of a director appointed by the President. As a special emergency measure and upon official request a bill has just been introduced into Congress for federal coordination of Public Employment service throughout the country to secure maximum production in essential war industries. Congress is asked to grant the federal service a considerable appropriation. The bill extends and unifies all labor-exchange functions of the government. Centralized control and unified policy would assure efficiency; close cooperation of state bureaus in touch with demand and supply of labor is secured by national aid, "dollar for dollar" to such state and city bureaus.

GAINS FROM NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

If the bill is passed, it will not only help to mobilize our labor to war strength, but will provide for the period of reconstruction and demobilization after peace, an effective method of absorbing soldiers back into industry; such regularization of industry will meet the increasing industrial needs of the future.

It may also provide the means for systematic inquiry, bringing real knowledge of the possibility of the substitution of the

labor reserve of women for that of men; the men displaced could be directed to the industries needing their service most; and the need for training the new industrial army of women would be made clear.

ANALYSIS OF THE LABOR FORCE

An efficient policy of labor distribution must be based on knowledge of the number of men engaged in trades, where they are, and the nature of their work and experience. The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not have and is not equipped to secure this information. Congress has given the Bureau but meager funds. Yet no intelligent policy of labor priority can be developed for the government by the War Industries Board Priority Committee, for instance, and followed by labor exchanges, until we have this full and detailed information about the labor supply, in the form of an index capable of practical use in finding individual workers.

The draft supplies such an index for the male labor force between twenty-one and thirty-one. But we need now a national registration of men and women between sixteen and sixty well planned and executed. This would be accomplished by a similar system, standardized for the nation; it would be simpler than the draft, as the irksome questions of dependents and liability to service would be eliminated. Such registrations, inadequately done, have already been tried by five states and, despite the crudity of the method, have proved of value. A modern filing system would convert a standardized national registration into an index of man power, to be used by exchanges, and of immeasurable value for subsidiary registrations to meet specific war and peace needs.

EMPLOYMENT MANAGEMENT IN PLANTS

In addition to an efficient system of labor exchanges and an index of labor to utilize our labor supply to the full by distribution, there must be real employment management inside the plant. Without waiting for securing a labor index, much can be done to meet the pressing needs of distribution of labor. The Emergency Fleet Corporation has introduced modern employment methods in the shipyards. In each yard, hiring is now done by this employment manager, who has analyzed his job. Applicants are put at work for which they are best fitted. If capable of taking training they may be sent to special schools. Teachers for this standardized instruction are already

being trained at Newport News. If foremen fire men the latter report to the manager before leaving, so that if possible they may be sent to other work in the plant, or be referred to the Federal Exchange for labor service in other shipyards. The local manager is the clearing house for labor and turnover will be much reduced, as it has in the last year by the introduction of similar methods of the New York Shipbuilding, Newport News and Fore River plants. This work will be materially aided by effective government aid to housing; the need here now constitutes the largest single factor in the disorganization of the labor situation. These methods must now be extended to all essential industries, steel and munition plants and railroads, especially. It represents the framework of the new machinery for labor distribution—local managers who work through the Public Employment Service, using scientific information publicly compiled.